

Romans 8:1-39 (NRSV)

Life in the Spirit

8 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Future Glory

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to

the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

God's Love in Christ Jesus

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Do Two Handings-Over Make One Freedom?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Romans 8:1-39*

Jesus died for our sins. To understand that simple sentence, Jesus died for our sins, that staple of Christian theology, is to unlock the mystery of our relationship with God. Conversely, I think it is fair to say that to misunderstand this statement, Jesus died for our sins, is to lock that mystery of God away, out of sight, and to develop contradictory and poisonous theologies in its place.

The early New testament writers were plagued with this question: Why did Jesus die? Or to put a sharper point on it, why did Jesus have to die?

At first, as we have seen, even his closest followers thought that Jesus was a failure. They followed him because he was charismatic. They followed him because he offered them hope. They followed him because had a message of love that, against their better judgement, they thought might work, because he had told them it would.

That fateful week in Jerusalem squashed the optimism. The disciples scattered. Some hid in a room behind locked doors. Some left town for Emmaus. What they all had in common was the utter certainty that it was over. Their friend and teacher had been executed. They were lucky to get away with their skins. And in an unresolved place inside them grappled with the contradictory feelings of grief and betrayal. On the one hand, they had lost their beloved master. On the other, though they could hardly bring themselves to say it aloud, he had misled them. They had let themselves get caught up in his naive fantasies. They had believed that they themselves could be that tiny mustard seed that could flourish into a mighty tree. How foolish they were to be taken in by such nonsense.

For those first followers in the days immediately after Jesus' death it was easy to answer why Jesus had to die. He had irritated the system. He had failed to understand power or politics. He was a dreamer whose dream painfully died nailed to a tree. Jesus had to die because he bucked the system. This is what the first followers thought. The truth, as we'll see a bit later, is they were pretty close to right.

On Sunday, the women went to the tomb to anoint the body. As you know, when they got there, the body was gone. When I was a young boy there was a cemetery on the street between our house and the center of town. It scared the dickens out of me. I used to hold my breath and rush by as fast as I could. At night, I would go even faster. I was afraid that the dead spirits would come and get me. Now, I doubt very much that the women at the tomb were afraid the spirits would come and get them. But there is something eerie about cemeteries, and I suspect it does have something to do with the divide between life and death. Death is inevitable and seemingly permanent. We cross the divide, we pass through the membrane. But nothing returns through it. Or if it does, it scares us, for we have no idea what ghosts live over there.

In one version of the women at the tomb on that Sunday left in fear. Who could blame them? Bad enough that Jesus had died. Now he was a ghost. As soon as they heard the story,

the others all thought the same thing. Thomas said he'd have to touch him. To prove he was alive, he ate fish in their presence, for ghosts don't have bodies with which to eat. The one's on the road to Emmaus didn't even recognize him.

Soon enough it got if not more scary, than at least more confusing. They had to reckon with the fact that he was in fact alive. They weren't sure what that meant. They knew he wasn't dead. They knew he wasn't a ghost. They knew that the crucifixion didn't have the last word. But things weren't the way they had been, either. He wasn't staying around. They couldn't just pick things up where they left off.

It may have been in this moment of confusion that they finally grasped the full force of what he meant when he said, "My father, who art in heaven." This man alive who once was dead was, indeed, the son of God. In the following centuries the Patristic theologians would work out the idea of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but even now Jesus' followers realized that they had witnessed Emmanuel, the incarnation, God with us. And they began to understand that he was still with them, even if they weren't exactly sure what that meant.

Once Jesus' followers got their minds around the incarnation, they still had some questions left. In fact, some new ones were coming up. They said, "Okay, if Jesus didn't come to wipe out the powers and the principalities, if he didn't come to be a war hero against Rome or against Judean corruption, exactly why did he come? We're back at the beginning question. If he came, and if he came to save us, and if he was crucified and then raised, exactly what does it mean that he came to save us?"

Like aerial fireworks on the 4th of July, Christian theology headed off into a huge array of bright paths. He came to save us, because through him we have eternal life. Because he was saved from death, so are we, too. I believe in eternal life, but I don't see why Jesus would have had to be crucified and raised for God to make it true. What, did God need to do a practice run, an experiment? If I can pull it off with my own son, then we'll give it a try with human subjects?

There were other ideas. Most of them started with the premise that God was angry at us. That seems like a pretty good bet. Look at our world today. War and famine and corruption; arrogance, abuse and oppression. I'm angry at us, and I expect that God was and still is.

One thread says that God was so angry at us that God condemned us. But then God wanted to save us. A condemned man has to pay a price. So, God sent Jesus to pay the price on our behalf. The sacrifice of God's son would be enough to buy our salvation.

There are lots of problems here, though. What kind of a God requires a human sacrifice, even that of his own son, to free people from condemnation? Not a God to which I turn for help.

But let's take this idea that God sacrificed his son to buy our salvation out to its logical conclusion. If that's the purpose of Jesus, if that's why he came, if his sacrifice is the good thing that happened, then those who crucified him were doing God's work. The scribes and Pharisees, the chief priests and the Roman governor were all doing God's will. That would seem very odd given what Jesus himself said about this cast of characters. It just doesn't make sense.

But there is a more basic contradiction at stake. Did God send Jesus into the world to condemn it or save it? "God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son that those who believed in him might have eternal life," says John. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth," also says John. Surely, God sent Jesus to save the world, not condemn it.

So, how should we think of God's anger? Probably like the loving anger that a parent has for a beloved child. What parent has not experienced anger and frustration at a child gone astray? And why? Because the parent can see the often horrible consequences that are ahead if the child keeps going where it is headed. Are young stars like Britney Spears punished for their transgressions? Not so much. But what is clear enough is that she is reaping the consequences of a lot of miserable choices.

Paul says that living in the flesh inevitably means that we will go astray. It is our fate. It is our nature. To be in the flesh means to be all about oneself. Paul himself was a perfect Pharisee he says. But why was he? So that he could boast. So that he could say he was better than others. To say that he deserved good treatment from God. It was all about Paul. In the flesh, when it's all about us, there is no escape from bad consequences. For being all about us means we have already fallen to the infection of worldly values. Ironically, when it's all about us, we are propelled to satisfy our desires with things that inevitably fail us.

So God, who loves us, does not condemn us. God watches us with a broken heart as we hand ourselves over to the consequences of our being. Day after day God sees that we who live in the flesh begin from the simple starting point of it being all about us. From that starting point comes envy and greed, possession and violence. No wonder Matthew and Mark speak of "wars and rumors of wars," as the human condition.

God sees the unending spiral we are in. No commandments, nothing we are able to do wholly on our own can save us. In compassion, then, God intervenes. God decides to take on human existence, to be incarnated, to be born in the flesh. God came to us to show us the truth about ourselves, and he came to reorient our focus.

The truth about ourselves is that bound up in the world of the flesh we crucified innocent perfection, and we did it in the name of government and religion, law and order. Jesus the innocent was executed by those who thought themselves doing their duty to God and country. God was willing to suffer that fate, to be handed over to our sin, that we might see clearly where life in the flesh leads, even by its best intentions.

Jesus the innocent was executed. Understanding what we had done was meant to shock us. This is where our best efforts lead? That was what God wanted us to see. For then, and only then, could we see that life in the flesh, life on our own terms, life in an it's-all-about-me world leads only to death.

By turning himself over to our sinful nature, God was able to save us from being turned over to the consequences of our living in the flesh. He saved us by giving us another way to live, not in the flesh but in Christ.

Now brothers and sisters, living in Christ does not mean that we will be perfect. Indeed, to think that way is to slip back into living in the flesh. But to live in Christ means that we are not duped by the idols that seduce us when we are in the flesh. As Paul says, "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."

When we are in Christ, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

"If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who

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